



FROM THE DESK OF THE DDSN MEDICAL CONSULTANT

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INFLUENZA

At this time of year we are being encouraged to get our flu shots and prepare for the flu season.

WHY ALL THE FUSS ABOUT THE FLU?

Because 20 - 50 Million Americans come down with the flu each influenza season (November to March). Most people have a self-limited attack and recover quickly. On the average, 100,000 go to the hospital and 20,000 die each year in the U.S. due to flu related illness. The illness spreads rapidly in epidemics during the flu season, and we do know that there are groups of people who have an increased risk of problems, so they need to be protected.

WHAT IS FLU?

Influenza (the flu) is a disease caused by the influenza virus. It is contagious (spread from person to person), and attacks the respiratory system (nose, throat, bronchial tubes and lungs) of humans. The illness comes on suddenly and knocks you off your feet. It can cause very high fever for 2-3 days with also headache, chills, tiredness that is often extreme, dry cough, sore throat, nasal congestion and body aches.

The influenza virus does not cause symptoms in the stomach and intestines. What is called "stomach flu" is not caused by the flu virus.

A cold will cause stuffy or runny nose, sneezing, mild cough, but not the high fever, overall head and body aches and extreme exhaustion of flu.

Flu can be a serious illness for people with chronic heart problems, asthma, diabetes, lung problems or immune disorders. Children 6 to 23 months old and adults over 65 years old are more likely to need to go to the hospital, so they are considered high risk.



HOW DOES FLU SPREAD?

You can get the flu if someone around you who has the flu sneezes or coughs and the flu virus is carried in the droplets they spill into the air. If you then breathe them into your mouth or nose you may get infected and have symptoms within 1 - 3 days. The droplets settle on surfaces and you may carry them to your nose or mouth on your hands, if you do not remember to wash your hands. Crowding indoors in the winter makes spread of the flu more likely.

HOW DO YOU DIAGNOSE THE FLU?

The pattern of complaints a patient has will give your health care provider the information to make the diagnosis when there is a wave of flu in the community. (See What Is Flu?) Some tests are done by health officials to follow the virus in the community. If you or a person you care for has flu symptoms, have it checked, especially if there is no flu in the area.

HOW DO WE PREVENT THE FLU?

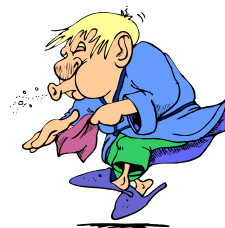
The main way to avoid the flu is to have a yearly flu vaccine. The influenza virus changes all the time so each year there needs to be a new vaccine based on the changing pattern of the virus. The vaccine uses inactivated (killed) flu viruses so it cannot cause infections. Sometimes the changes in the virus happen to produce a new strain after the vaccine has been made for that year. It is true that therefore you may get infected if this happens, but the vaccine appears to help you with some protection and your flu episode is less serious.

There are some antiviral drugs that may be given to people at special risk in order to prevent infection.

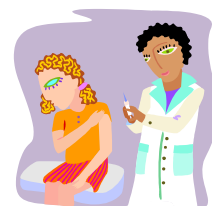
WHAT ARE POSSIBLE SIDE EFFECTS OF THE FLU VACCINE?

The vaccine can cause some soreness at the site of the vaccination. Some children get a rise in temperature, muscle aches and tiredness for a day.

The vaccine is produced on eggs. If you are allergic to eggs or have had a reaction to past flu vaccines, discuss this with your doctor before having the vaccine.



“The main way to avoid the flu is to have a yearly flu vaccine.”



WHO SHOULD GET THE FLU VACCINE?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) advise that if you have chronic lung, kidney, heart disease, diabetes, immune disorder or severe anemia, you are wise to have the vaccine. They advise all adults over 50 years old and persons living in chronic care facilities should be vaccinated. We therefore, need to offer it to many of our consumers. The CDC also recommends that staff caring for persons with these conditions should be immunized so that they are less likely to carry the virus to the persons they care for. Therefore, we should also have the yearly vaccine for influenza. Children may be vaccinated to prevent them from transferring the illness from school to family members who are risk.

IF WE GET THE FLU, HOW DO WE TREAT IT?

Most people can simply rest in bed, drink plenty of fluids (non-alcoholic is best please), and take aspirin, ibuprofen or acetaminophen (Tylenol). Usually, this is all that is need. It is wise if you stay home from 4 - 7 days to recover yourself and to restrict the chance of spreading the flu. Please do not give aspirin to children or adolescents with the flu, as the combination can cause serious side-effects. Antibiotics are not used for simple influenza, as they do not work against viruses. There are four antiviral medications available now that can work in influenza, if given in the first 48 hours of the illness.

WHAT COMPLICATIONS SHOULD WE WATCH FOR?

Usually after 2 - 4 days, the fever of flu goes down and there is some improvement. If after this the person with flu symptoms has a return or the start of a high fever, shaking chills, chest pain with breathing or coughs up thick, yellow-greenish colored mucus, they need to see a doctor. If a person has fast breathing or wheezing, then pneumonia is possibly the cause and we need to act quickly and seek medical attention as soon as possible.

Children can have serious side-effects as mentioned, if aspirin is given during flu. If they start with nausea, vomiting or drowsiness, please ask for help. Youngsters with flu and fever may also have febrile seizures, croup or ear infections (otitis) that need to be watched.

" Please do not give aspirin to children or adolescents with the flu, as the combination can cause serious side-effects."

WHAT SHOULD WE DO NOW?

- If you have not gotten the flu vaccine, get it now (through mid-December).
- Make sure all those you care for who are at risk, have been offered the vaccine.
- Keep yourself, family and consumers fit by eating, sleeping and exercising sensibly.
- Wash hands regularly to avoid spread to your face mouth and nose, if the flu is around.

IF YOU OR PERSONS YOU CARE FOR GET THE FLU, PLEASE . . .

- rest.
- drink plenty of fluids.
- take pain medication.
- stay home from 4 - 7 days.
- cover your nose and mouth with a handkerchief when sneezing or coughing to reduce spread of the virus.
- watch for complications.
- if after improvement a person gets fever, chills, hard or painful breathing or colored mucus, get it checked.
- plan for the flu vaccine again next year, preferably in November.

The influenza virus sometimes changes a great deal, and we get waves of a new virus like the Spanish Flu in 1918, Asian Flu 1952 - 1958, Hong Kong Flu 1968 - 1969. The global health network reduces the chances of this happening nowadays. This system has blocked Swine Flu in 1976, Avian Flu in 1997 and in 1999 Influenza A [H9N2]. Health officials watch for these changes and have plans to block spread. The flu vaccine is the key to this control. It protects each of us who are vaccinated, and is most useful when given yearly.